

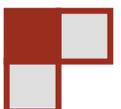
# Reflections on Women in the Arab Spring

In Celebration of  
International Women's  
Day 2012

Women's Voices from Around the World

Middle East Program  
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

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**Haleh Esfandiari**, *Director, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*

On the occasion of International Women’s Day, March 8, 2012, the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center asked a cross-section of women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the United States, and other countries to reflect on how women have fared in the Arab Spring.

Women were active participants in demonstrations and the protest movement in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and other countries. During the uprisings, there was no gender segregation among the demonstrators—not in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, Manama’s Pearl Square, nor on the streets of Tunis, Sana’a, and Tripoli. Women and men stood side by side, marched together, protected each other from government forces, and were united in calling for reform and regime change. But once the anciens regimes fell, the old barriers of segregation went up. Women were harassed, beaten, and chased out of public spaces. To everyone’s dismay, only nine women were elected to the Egyptian parliament, and no woman was elected to the Kuwaiti parliament. But as these reflections of women who were participants or keen observers of the Arab Spring demonstrate, there is no turning back. As in Iran, where women have fought for their rights for three decades under the Islamic Republic, the women of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and the rest of the Middle East are determined that the struggle for women's rights must continue.

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**Shirin Ebadi**, *Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and Iranian Human Rights Lawyer and Activist*

The “Arab Spring” is not an accurate description of the popular uprisings that have taken place in the Muslim countries of North Africa. The fall of a dictator does not mean democracy. In the popular uprising in Iran in 1979, a dictator fell from power, but a religious tyranny took the place of democracy. It follows that the popular uprisings in North Africa, although resulting in the downfall of dictators, will be of value only if they lead to democratic governments. Only under a democratic government will people enjoy equal rights.

For years, women in these countries have suffered from gender discrimination. For this reason, in the popular uprisings in these countries, women played a prominent role; and without the presence of women, victory would not have been possible. Now at the moment of victory, the women in these countries demand their rights. Only when women achieve their rights can we say that the “Arab Spring” has commenced. So far, it would appear that the situation of Tunisian women is better than that of women elsewhere. We must wait for calm to return to Libya and Egypt, as well. It is only in societal calm that it is possible to talk of equal rights. I know that Arab women will not allow a culture of patriarchy once again to trample on their rights.



**Moushira Khattab**, *Former Egyptian Ambassador to South Africa and to the Czech and Slovak Republics; and Former Minister of Family and Population, Egypt*

As the global community celebrates International Women’s Day, we must hail the heroic and pivotal role Egyptian women played to make the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution an inspiration for the world. They joined men and took to Tahrir Square calling for freedom, dignity, and social justice. They rallied around the cause of pushing the train of political change. One year later, Egyptian women find that the train of change has not only left them behind, but has in fact turned against them. It is ironic that the revolution that empowered a country, and made every Egyptian realize the power of their voice, stopped short of women’s rights. Sadly, the only march that was kicked out of Tahrir Square was that of women celebrating 2011 International Women’s Day. Women were beaten, subjected to virginity tests, and stripped of their clothes in the very same Tahrir Square.

Dormant conservative value systems are being manipulated by a religious discourse that denies women their rights. Calls for purging the sins of the old regime necessitate a reminder of the

positive outcomes of laws that, although enacted under that old regime, have liberated and enhanced women's status, including prohibiting female genital mutilation and child marriage. We also need a reminder that such gains are only a step towards these rights, and are the outcome of collective hard work along generations. Against the background of parliamentary elections, defenders of women's rights have backed down, while young revolutionaries don't have women's rights on their agendas. The most telling indicator is the shameful and meager representation of women in Egypt's post-revolution parliament. Among a handful of elected female MPs, one declared that her top priority is to repeal the law granting women the right to seek divorce.

With religious parties controlling it, the question becomes: will this parliament be willing and able to produce a constitution that guarantees equal rights to all Egyptians regardless of gender or religion? Dare we dream that Egyptians in 2012 could have a constitution equal to that put in place by South Africans in 1996?

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**Rola Dashti**, *Former member of Kuwaiti Parliament and Chairman, Kuwait Economic Society*

The reality of Arab women today in light of the Arab awakening puts more than a question mark over her real participation and future role in shaping the transitional period to achieve the objective of the Arab Spring. Arab women did not distant themselves during the Arab revolution. On the contrary, they were an integral partner in the struggle, demanding change and reform to achieve social justice, human dignity, freedom, and civil and political rights. They played a prominent role in the popular uprisings and fought courageously and boldly, withstanding the bitterness and cruelty, and were in the same boat with their male counterparts in order to reach the noble goals of the Arab Spring. But, unfortunately, the Arab awakening for her was a spring without flowers.

To date, with all the joy that accompanied the awakening's victory in a number of countries that embraced the revolutions, male practices to the contrary have disappointed women dreadfully and have not given a positive impression that they will engage women as partners and citizens with rights to participate in the formation of the future of their countries. In countries that have witnessed an Arab awakening, women's presence in transitional councils, new governments, and parliaments is almost non-existent, especially when compared to their role during the revolutions. These actions have created disappointments and frustrations among women as their aspirations in building their societies based on the principles of social justice and equality have been hijacked.

Arab women's presence and participation in public life—specifically in politics, decision-making positions, and state affairs—moved from marginalization during repressive regimes to rejection with Islamists regimes. The Islamists not only picked up the fruits of the revolution, but also

hijacked the principles that started the awakening as far as women are concerned. Their social policies regarding the role of women will be focused on bringing women back to the private sphere where they believe their role to be. This social exclusion policy from public life that will be adopted by Islamists—after exploiting her role during the uprising—is the starting point of the deterioration of the principles of equality, social justice, human dignity, and political pluralism advocated by the revolutionists.

Furthermore, the promotion of moderate Islamism by Islamists in power is nothing more than a hidden agenda of radical and extremist ideologies when it comes to social issues and citizens' rights, especially as it concerns women. Hence, it will not be surprising to see the Arab region going through alarming nightmares and waking up to a deep, hot Arabic summer.

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**Rend Al-Rahim**, *Executive Director, Iraq Foundation*

The Arab Spring has proven to be a bleak season for Arab women. In virtually all countries, the elections that profess to herald democracy have denied women fair representation in the public sphere. Though women played an active and courageous role in the Egyptian uprising, they gained only nine seats in the nearly 500-strong Egyptian parliament. In Kuwait, which had four women MPs, there are now none. Results are not likely to be better in Libya and Yemen. In Libya, the fighters who now hold power have declared that *shari'a* will be the law of the land. That implies that women will only have the rights men choose to grant them. In Yemen, where women protested alongside men, the political arena is dominated exclusively by those who tote machine guns—the men.

A similar retreat in the civil and human rights of women may well occur, as constitutions are written and laws are passed. It's not an issue of Islam. Though the Salafist trend denies rights for women, the Muslim Brotherhood, less extreme and more numerous, fielded women candidates for parliament in Egypt (and before that in Iraq). The retreat in women's rights has more to do with the resurgence of patriarchal, narrowly conservative, social mores embedded in ancient tribal customs than with religion. *Shari'a* is only a convenient peg for the deeper instinct of male dominance.

Is the expression "women's rights" counter-productive? Maybe. Perhaps we should rather insist on women's rights being accepted simply as human rights and women being seen as human beings above all else. That may help break down resistance.

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**Fatima Sbaity Kassem**, *Former Director, UN-ESCWA Centre for Women*

It is too soon to call these popular uprisings an “Arab Spring.” We do not know where these are taking the Arabs or in which season we are.

Nonetheless, it comes as no surprise—at least not to me—that women are losing their previously gained rights and status with Islamists gaining ground. But, this may be temporary!

I have shown elsewhere that political parties, the main vehicles for nominating candidates, differ in their support for women’s leadership. As religiosity in parties’ platforms rises, women’s chances in leadership and decision-making fall. Thus, as Islamist parties continue winning majority votes in electorally held elections (i.e., Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Kuwait), we see that women’s visibility and political participation in decision-making processes is falling. Women are asked to go back home after having actively participated in the uprisings. They do not figure prominently in the post-revolt councils and committees. Women are subjected to a plethora of violence from outright harassment to virginity tests to rape. They are also stripped from previously acquired rights, human rights. What else should we expect?

We must not be fooled by statistics and higher shares for women in democratically held elections in some of the countries that succeeded in toppling autocratic regimes and despot rulers. Whole families ran for elections to fill out legislated quotas for women. But, the onus of proof is on decision-making, leadership positions, and processes. Will these female parliamentarians make a difference in the strife for gender equality and elimination of discriminatory practices? This is the real question.

It is a waiting and seeing game. After all, these are the advantages of democracy. The will of the people—including women—should push for “women-friendly” Islamists.

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**Dalia Ziada**, *Egypt office director, American Islamic Congress*

It is disappointing how Egyptian women were purposefully marginalized after their heroic role in the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution that ousted 30 years of dictatorship. Women in Egypt are literally half the population. I cannot imagine establishing democracy while marginalizing half the population because of their gender. Egyptian women are divided into two main categories: the grassroots and the elite. The grassroots are the women who live in rural areas with limited or

no education and are strongly forced to abide by the unfair patriarchal mindset of the society. The elite women are the rebellious, educated, challenging, and daring women who are struggling to be part of the political decision-making process and already have made significant contributions to Egypt's economy. Neither of the two groups have access to equal opportunities with men, but they are still insisting on changing this reality. After the rise of Islamists, the Egyptian woman is now almost crushed between two stones: patriarchal mentality and religious extremism. I still believe that Egyptian women will surprise everyone by changing their reality very soon.

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**Omezzine Khélifa**, *Former Candidate for National Constituent Assembly, Ettakatol Party*

Women were on the front-lines of the protest movement that ousted former Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben-Ali, and they have continued to play an important role in the transition. Despite the brutality of the old regime, from a strictly gender perspective, women actually fared well. Tunisia's Personal Status Code is the most progressive in the Arab world, and a consistent emphasis on girls' education and female employment has meant that Tunisian women have one of the highest rates of female workforce participation in the region. In the precarious political climate since Ben Ali's fall, women realize that they have the most to lose if the transition does not go well and, as a result, have continued to be very active in the political process. In September, women's NGOs played a critical role in pushing the Tunisian government to lift key reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)—the first country in the region to do so. And thanks to an incredibly progressive electoral law for the National Constituent Assembly elections that required each party list to have candidates alternate between men and women, about 5,000 women stood as candidates in elections in October 2011. Currently, 27 percent of representatives in the National Constituent Assembly are women. I was one of those female candidates. Although I did not win a seat, I am still playing an active role within the Ettakatol (Forum Démocratique pour le Travail et les Libertés) party. In particular, I am working with other women to help set up a women's bureau within the party.

Despite our active political participation, women remain wary of the constitutional drafting process. It's a very delicate process where a word change can move our rights backwards. Yet, I remain optimistic. After years of women playing a prominent role in society, women's empowerment is deeply ingrained in our culture. And it's not just a female struggle, many men are just as committed to gender equality. Therefore, if women's rights ever came under threat, there would be a huge backlash.

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**Lamees Al Taie**, *founding member of the Omani Women's Association and member of the Omani Upper House State Council*

Middle Eastern women are not new to participation in society, including voicing their political opinions. I came from Oman's rich, pre-oil times and remember the passionate discussions and educated young men and women who formed my generation. We challenged what we viewed as unfair and demanded participation in decision-making, at the very least being informed of what was being committed in our name.

Even before that time, during pre-Islamic and Islamic times, Middle Eastern women were present and strong; if you look into history you'll find many, many examples. To name a few names would be unjust. From the Queen of Sheba all the way to the first Omani policewomen, they all challenged the norm. They all left their mark on their societies.

I was, therefore, not surprised, yet still extremely proud, of the young women who came out and stood up for their beliefs during the Arab Spring, of the young lady on YouTube from Egypt, and the ones all over the region.

My pride stemmed not from being with them 100 percent—we all have our different opinions, and the Arab Spring came with many requests. But my pride stemmed from reinforcing that we are not a nation that does not care. We care. We speak out for what we believe in. We respect everyone's voice and opinion.

I, like many others, look forward to a future where this civil discussion is sustained by all sides. We are a civilization to be remembered, once again.



**Farzaneh Milani**, *Professor of Persian Literature and Women's Studies and Chair of the Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures, University of Virginia*

The year 2011 will probably be remembered for its perennial spring: the Arab Spring, a time of transformative change and rejuvenation. A non-violent, desegregated, transgressive, youth-generated, and technologically savvy movement has swept across many countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The massive participation of throngs of women, walking shoulder to shoulder and side by side with men, is a turning point in the contemporary history of the region. It is indeed a revolution within revolutions. Although there will be many challenges ahead, particularly for those women who have transgressed all conventional boundaries and traditional spaces, the genie is out of the bottle.



**Isobel Coleman**, *Senior Fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy, Director of the Civil Society, Markets, and Democracy Initiative, Council on Foreign Relations*

As activists, protesters, and ordinary citizens, women have been leaders in the grassroots movements that upended the long-entrenched authoritarian regimes in the Middle East this past year. Dictatorships are not good for anyone's rights, and if the uprisings across the region yield more democratic, just, and transparent governments, women's rights will certainly benefit. However, women cannot take for granted that their activism will translate into political and legal gains in the emerging systems. Indeed, newly empowered Islamist groups are calling for changes in women's legal status that could roll back existing rights.

In Egypt, women have been excluded from important decision-making bodies, and fewer than ten women won seats in Egypt's new parliament – less than 2 percent of the 498 seats. Shocking incidents such as attacks on an International Women's Day march, sexual assaults against female activists and journalists, and the brutal beating of women in Tahrir Square have become markers for how deeply contested women's public role in society continues to be. Women seem to be faring better in Tunisia, where they have long benefited from the most expansive legal rights in the region. Al Nahda, the leading Islamist party which swept Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly elections with 41 percent of the vote, has said that it will not seek to change the country's personal status laws but instead will focus on practical economic issues. Thanks to electoral rules requiring favorable placement of women on party lists, women gained 23 percent of the seats in the Assembly, a higher share than in the U.S. Congress. In Libya, the situation for women is unclear, as secularists and conservative Islamists vie for influence. One of the first announcements from Libya's National Transitional Council was that any laws that contradict *shari'a* would be annulled and, going forward, polygamy would be legal. Libyan women expressed disappointment and wondered why, with all of Libya's pressing issues, reinstating polygamy should be on the front burner.

With the success of Islamists at the polls, women's rights activists must find ways to deal effectively with the demands of these influential political groups. How *shari'a* is reconciled with women's rights, and more broadly human rights, will be an important determinant of how democracy and law evolve in these countries.

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**Robin Wright**, *USIP-Wilson Center Distinguished Scholar*

Women were on the frontlines of uprisings across the Arab world, from Bahrain to Syria. In Libya, women helped run ammunition to rebel militias trying to bring down the Qaddafi regime. A female blogger in Yemen won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize as an opposition leader. Their role partly reflects the leap in education and literacy, with the majority of females in most Arab

countries now able to read and write – which in turn leads them to want a greater stake in deciding their future. But at the same time, the ouster of dictators has not produced many tangible benefits to women. In Egypt, the ruling military abandoned the quota that guaranteed females 10 percent of the seats in parliament. Nour, the Salafist party in Egypt, refused to run pictures of its female candidates, instead using flowers or party logos. An attempt in Egypt to hold a million women’s march met with male resistance and harassment. Political openings, so far, have only put more men in power.



**Yeşim Arat**, *Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs (Provost), Boğaziçi University, Turkey*

I am a cautious optimist regarding the expansion of women’s opportunities in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Yes, we know very well how women can be and were marginalized after revolts and revolutions where they were engaged participants. Examples include wars of independence like that of Algiers or revolts against authoritarianism or inequality like the Iranian Revolution of 1978. However, I feel it will become increasingly more difficult to keep women at bay in an interdependent and connected world. In our information age of globalization, where people know what those in other parts of the world are doing, women and men everywhere are aware there are human rights, and women’s rights are human rights. When this awareness is internalized it will be difficult to override these rights. Despite setbacks—and there will be many—once women begin demanding the opportunities they deserve, in the long term, they will get them. Short term backlashes should not discourage us—we should keep on demanding the dignified lives we deserve as women.



**Cheryl Benard**, *Adjunct analyst, RAND Corporation; and President of ARCH (Alliance for the Restoration of Cultural Heritage)*

Revolutions are almost always a mixed picture for women. In East Germany, revolution brought reunification, the freedom to travel, and democracy—but it also brought a sharp reduction in the number of political offices held by women, their representation in parliament, and their percentages in the sciences and technical professions. This was due in part to the elimination of the strong net of social services that had earlier made it easy for them to combine work and family, and in part to the machismo of the reformers. The Arab Spring included an impressive number of activist women—women who used new media to keep the world informed and engaged, women who helped rally the reformist spirit, and women who took part in risky

confrontations with the old guard. To me, the more impressive image—because it flew so directly in the face of the stereotype—was that of ordinary men encouraging and facilitating the overt public participation by the women in their family. We saw women being lifted above the crowd to better chant a slogan, women being driven through the streets in open cars so they could hold a banner aloft, women’s voices not only heard, but encouraged. This was, to me, a very encouraging glimpse into what I can only assume are the inner dynamics of the couples and families involved. There are many things to worry about. Women were targets of violence and harassment. If fundamentalism seizes the vacuum that follows the revolution, women’s rights will suffer. But my own study of women in situations of massive societal change leads me to worry most about a different risk. Very typically, revolutionary and reformist women see their own participation as temporary and as principally moral. They see the political struggle that inevitably follows as something that is ugly and taints you, so they voluntarily withdraw from it. That is a fine sentiment, but it leaves the field to those who are far less idealistic. It’s not enough to tough it out in Tahrir Square, and the fall of a regime is not the time to happily go home again. You have to get your hands dirty in the struggle that follows, or you may regret not having stayed home in the first place.

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**Sultana Al-Jeham**, *Executive Director and Chairwoman of Women's Affairs, Civic Democratic Initiatives Support Foundation (CDF), Yemen*

The words “Arab Spring” brought hopes of “the new will be better.”

The Arab Spring gave women a golden opportunity, but time is limited and if they don’t benefit from it, it will become an Arab Winter for them. For example, through the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) Initiative, Yemeni women are required to have their voices heard and be a part of all the committees the Initiative mentions. This is very important for the future of women’s political participation. Therefore, women need to forget about competition right now and work together for achieving women’s goals. Women should focus on women’s issues, not only in the political and decision-making realms, but also on social and economic issues, too.

There were many laws which women struggled to modify before the Arab Spring, such as personal laws, citizenship laws, and those concerning elections. Now is the time to push for these changes through lobbying and advocacy work, as well as suggestions and recommendations.

The Arab Spring will help women to move from marginalization to becoming leaders, and from being excluded from economic opportunities to being included.

All hope is now resting on women more than anyone else. In order to shape their new role, women must invest their skills in active political participation regarding constitutions, laws, and transitional justice discussions.



**Rangita de Silva de Alwis**, *Director, Women in Public Service Project Institute 2012, Wellesley College*

The promise of the Arab Spring is being eroded by the paucity of women in decision-making in democratic and transitional justice processes. While celebrating the transformation to more democratic processes of government, women in the region are deeply concerned about public acts of violence against women and the threatened roll back of progressive reforms made on behalf of women.

The Arab Spring has been a lightning rod for some important reforms on behalf of women. Tunisia and Morocco have removed their reservations to CEDAW, and Tunisia's parity law is the first in the region to call for equal representation of women in the legislature. Political and social transitions offer unique opportunities for recasting and transforming social, economic, and political structures, especially for the benefit of those denied human rights and access to decision-making processes. Importantly, the Arab Spring offers an opportunity to focus on women's empowerment as a cornerstone of democratic governance and the rule of law. Only women's full and equal participation in political, social, and economic life can honor the spirit of the revolutions.



**Ferdous Ara Begum**, *Former member of the UN CEDAW Committee, Bangladesh*

Celebrating International Women's Day 2012 could be very significant in the Arab world as they approached the first anniversary of the Arab Spring from the perspective of women's revolutionary participation in it for equality, freedom, justice, democracy, peace, and protection of human rights. Women's heroic role in the Arab Spring gave a strong signal for a change in the attitude toward women and their full and equal participation in the decision-making process in the region.

I hope that Arab women will continue their role as leaders and change-makers in society and continue participating equally in the restoration of peace, justice, and the nation-building process as mentioned in Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820.

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**Margot Badran**, *Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center and Senior Fellow, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim Christian Understanding, Georgetown University*

Women were integral to the success of the eighteen-day uprising in 2011 in Egypt that brought the downfall of Mubarak. Heading into the second phase of the revolution, women intended to continue to put their skills, expertise, and experience in the service of the nation. However, they were met with side-lining when no women were included in the committee created soon after the expulsion of Mubarak at the behest of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to draft amendments to the constitution prior to the parliamentary elections; and this is despite the abundance of distinguished women judges, lawyers, and legal scholars in Egypt. Women swiftly objected, speaking out in public forums, forcefully laying out the injustice and folly of excluding women. In doing such, women were the first group in Egypt to directly confront the SCAF. Women held their first public demonstration on the occasion of International Women’s Day on March 8, 2011 protesting their exclusion from the constitutional committee. They were vulgarly taunted and bodily assaulted by thugs in scenes reminiscent of the violence unleashed against women demonstrators under Mubarak. The following day, numbers of women were picked up by the military, beaten, and subjected to virginity tests.

In the months that followed, sexual harassment of women continued, most starkly captured by a photograph which went viral of a soldier with his boot above the exposed torso of a woman demonstrator brought to the ground and stripped half naked. This unconscionable act ignited further outcry and intensified the politicization of women, and increasing numbers of men as well. Women in the thousands went out on a march on December 20<sup>th</sup> from Tahrir Square, and a second women’s march joined other streams of protesters on December 23<sup>rd</sup> leaving from Al Azhar University after the Friday prayer. A participant in these marches, I witnessed the courage and determination of women of all ages and classes. Women are infuriated but in no way intimidated. Now, on the occasion of International Women’s Day 2012, women’s organizations throughout the country, which have been reinvigorated by the revolution, are planning once again for a women’s march. The women, and supportive men, who will be part of the march are demanding that women have a place on the committee that will be appointed to draft the new constitution and that all laws passed over the last two decades consolidating gains for women will be safeguarded. It remains to be seen on Women’s Day 2012 if thugs, wearing whatever clothes and under the orders of whomever, will be on hand to bodily assault the women in a repeat performance. Or might they and their masters fear the next boomerang?

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**Souad Eddouada**, *Professor, Department of English, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco; and Academic Director SIT Morocco, Migration Studies*

Even if it is a quite problematic term, “Arab Spring,”—which incorporates heterogeneous societies with a major portion of the population in North Africa that does not necessarily identify itself as Arab and has been for decades advocating various forms of Amazigh, or Berber, identities—the revolutionary environment in the Middle East and North Africa has provided women with massive access to the public sphere. Despite its short-lived existence, women’s visibility as protestors was not only tolerated but required. Women were asked to rally as individual citizens, but also as mothers, wives, and daughters. The “Arab Spring” brought to power conservative political groups. Yet, it is leading to a shift from elite and state feminisms to more grassroots youth activism whose equal access to social media tools is empowering individuals regardless of their gender or social class. Revolutions and protest movements in the Middle East and North Africa region are unequivocally leading to dramatic changes in the way different segments of these societies relate to a deep-rooted authoritarianism. The possibilities for these changes to translate themselves into cultural values that include men and women’s views of democracy and freedom remain to be seen.



**Bissane El-Cheikh**, *journalist and writer, Al Hayat newspaper, Beirut office*

If women's rights are to be considered an indicator of democracy and progress in countries of the Arab Spring, the least that could be said is that the situation is alarming, if not scary. It could be easily argued that women's rights and freedoms were neither respected nor granted even before the revolutions started. Yet this injustice was part of a whole system where citizens (men and women alike) were denied basic civic and human rights. Therefore, when a revolution erupts under the banner of overthrowing a despotic regime and establishing a true democracy, it has to stand for that principle. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

In Libya, the first "revolutionary" decision taken by the transitional government was to allow polygamy, a practice long forbidden and forgotten in Libyan society.

In Egypt, women lost more than 50 seats in the new parliament. In the electoral campaign, pictures of female candidates from Hizb al Nour (the Light Party) were replaced either by a flower, or by a picture of the candidate’s husband.

In Tunisia, once a stronghold of secularism and a haven for women's rights in the region, Salafists are calling out loud for the re-adoption of female circumcision as part of the Islamic culture. Those calls are not coming from marginal groups or some unknown clerics; they are being discussed thoroughly among different key political players of the post-revolution scene.

There are serious concerns that political Islam will impose new restrictions on the status of women in the Arab Spring countries, especially among those who started the revolutions hoping for a better future where democracy does not discriminate between genders and does not bear the mark of an ethnicity or a religion.

In this context, Turkey is often cited as a success story and a role model regarding the rule of an Islamic party. But those who preach for the adoption of a Turkish model in the post-revolutionary Arab world tend to forget that Turkey is still a secular republic with a secular constitution, whereas Islamists are attempting to amend the constitutions according to the now defunct sultanate values.



**Wafa Alamm**, *Bahraini announcer on Almaydeen News Channel*

The Arab world is going through a phase referred to as “the Arab Spring,” but in reality the Arab world is moving towards more fragmentation and disintegration, and more conflict in the region. As a matter of fact, all indicators show that this world is heading towards decline and underdevelopment. There are increasing fears about the negative impact of these changes on women’s conditions, especially with the rise of political Islam that narrows and limits women’s frameworks.

If we consider women’s conditions as part of building a society—affected by and affecting society based on its environment—women, just as men, face major challenges. However, unlike men, women face two battles: the first for political change and the second to obtain a real change of their societal status to become fully equal to their male counterparts. Arab women need to fight perceptions and traditions that for a long time made them second-class citizens.

The challenge is to succeed in the fight against the dictatorship first so that the women’s revolution against traditional values in society can also succeed. It is also the advent of the forces of progress and openness, although the Islamic movements have taken the lead. But it seems to me that these movements have realized that they cannot achieve anything without women, and women need to be more proactive.

Women face a big challenge and must continue their fight until the end. Revolutions don’t work without people, and societies don’t succeed without women.



**Hayat Arslan**, *President of the Committee for Women’s Political Empowerment and Head of Media and Public Relations for the National Commission for Lebanese Women*

The Arab Spring is usurped.

A belief consolidated by acts and performances.

Participants in the Arab Spring are disappointed, namely women, educated and enlightened people.

Focusing on women, they acted as “core partners and achievers” and are now suffering aggressive marginalization reaching gender-based violence.

Their endurance, instead of being appreciated, is used as a requirement for an excessive longer endurance.

Their patience is fed up with and is used as a tool to negate their claims.

Their courage in offering supportive deeds is taken for granted with no reward.

Their conviction in the ameliorating effects of the Arab Spring is to be destroyed.

Their confidence in the coming democracy is shaken deeply.

No, not accepted or submitted to....no surrender, no subjectivity.

Emotionally, we are angry, condemning the performance and mentality of the authoritative men of the Arab Spring. We are calling for change.

The inconsistency and shortsightedness of Arab Spring leaders will certainly vanish, and the blossoms of a real spring will flower soon. It’s the will of people.

Women, unity is the milestone.

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**Nayereh Tohidi**, *Professor in the Gender and Women’s Studies Department at California State University, Northridge and a Research Associate at the Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA*

My perception of and reflection on the gender dimension of the so-called Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are informed by the personal experience of living through two revolutions: Iran in 1978-79 and the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991-92. I have been a witness to the important and massive roles women played in each of those revolutionary processes and the subsequent paradoxical impacts they have left on women’s status.

Some of my Iranian feminist friends are already lamenting that the Arab “spring,” much like the Islamic Revolution of 1979, has become tantamount to a “fall” for Arab women’s rights. But how can we conceive that the bringing down of dictators—the very symbols of patriarchy—has been bad for women? Well, many of us have learned that the removal of a big and repressive patriarch ruling over a country is much easier than the removal of patriarchy, that is, male supremacy and sexism in the society.

The undeniable, empowering, dignifying, and inspiring aspects of the Arab Spring for women, as well as men, cannot close one's eyes to certain violent, regressive, and immediate consequences on the ground. The trajectory and outcome of uprisings in each country are being shaped by their own specificities. However, from Tunisia to Libya, the gender-related consequences seem to be worrisome and, at best, paradoxical. In almost all the uprisings that erupted in the region, women played important roles and have figured rather prominently, thus shattering stereotypes of Arab women as secluded, passive, and submissive. Especially young Arab women like young Arab men, influenced by the processes of globalization and informed by new communication technologies, asserted their agency through new ways of organizing, networking, and activism. They displayed novel forms of resistance. They overcame the "learned helplessness" that years of suppression had embedded in their psyches and gained a new sense of self-respect and dignity against years of humiliation.

The significance of Arab women's socio-political presence in these transformative processes became well exemplified in women like Asma Mahfouz of Egypt or Tawakkol Karman of Yemen, the first Arab woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In her acceptance speech in November 2011, Karman called on her sisters "to win their rights in a society dominated by the supremacy of men."



**Nadereh Chamlou**, *Senior Advisor, Office of the Chief Economist, Middle East and North Africa Region, The World Bank*

The sky over the Arab Spring was indisputably held up by both men and women alike, across all faiths, ages, and income groups. I say indisputably, because historians, who have in general failed to reflect women's roles in all past world events, can no longer miss the extensive body of evidence sent through citizens' journalism and social networks that provide strong testimony to women's contributions in the Arab upheavals. So far, what is missing, however, is women's commensurate participation in the aftermath of these events. Far worse, the tenor of the post-revolutionary debates is increasingly about taking away, in the name of democracy, the rights of women, minorities, and other marginal groups. Let's do the math. Women account for about 51 percent of the population of the region. When added to the 5-10 percent of other religious and ethnic minorities, we come to about 60 percent of the population that risks being excluded. Will such discrimination lead to democracy? I turn to Professor Gary Becker of the University of Chicago and the 1992 Nobel Prize winner in Economics, who has pioneered the work on discrimination. Professor Becker's research found that when minorities account for a small share of the population, the cost and consequences of discrimination are born by these minorities. But, when the discriminated groups represent a large percentage of the population, the cost of discrimination is borne by the discriminators. With women and minorities adding up to the majority of any of these countries' populations, it is doubtful that the rest will benefit. This phenomenon is even more pronounced in politics. In 1979, the Iranian people had a

revolution to bring about democracy. The first act after the revolution was to take away the rights of women, and then other groups. Today, 33 years later, democracy has still not been attained. The Arab world will not be an exception, and its democracy will only be achievable if every citizen has the same rights and opportunities.

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**Heba Philip Zaki Micheal**, *Reporter and Washington Correspondent for ON TV and Washington Correspondent for Al Masry al Youm Newspaper, Egypt*

It seemed like a great moment when the Egyptian people managed to end Mubarak's rule and call for freedom and dignity in early 2011. Women stood side by side with fellow male protesters in Tahrir Square demanding their rights and living in a true democracy. They didn't call for these rights for men only, they called for every Egyptian man, woman, and child to have and enjoy these rights. A year later, the situation for women is deteriorating rapidly due to the rise of Islamic factions with a crippling interpretation of women's role in society, as well as the military leadership ignoring the role of women in building that society. The brutal treatment of women protesters has dispirited many as they look at Egypt's near future and the role of women.

Women in Egypt have been subjected to several kinds of discrimination and imprisonment, pushing them to minority status and keeping them away from a meaningful political debate. The committee to amend the constitution excluded all women legal experts. The transitional government only appointed three women cabinet members out of 30 in the cabinet. This number is lower than that during Mubarak's reign. In the newly elected parliament, 98 percent of MPs are men. It seems that the political change which took place in Egypt was calling for "half a democracy" just for men.

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**Lina Hundaileh**, *Chairman and CEO, Printing for the Manufacturing of Chocolate and Chairwoman of the Young Entrepreneurs Association, Jordan*

Until now, the situation is not clear. I think whatever has been done in this respect will be affected negatively unless we women create a strong body to lobby and advocate for our rights. To be present in all the decision-making that is taking place in our countries, we need to be proactive, smart, different, and, above all, send the same message in order to be heard.

I hope to be able to create this body of women with the help of the international organizations in all the Arab countries and learn and share experiences from each other in order not to re-invent the wheel.



**Hanan Saab**, *Managing Director, PHARMAMED*

It started when my Egyptian friend who was visiting Beirut shared with me messages that she was receiving through social media rallying for action in Egypt. This was in the wake of the Tunisian uprising. Little did I estimate then of the active pursuit of social media by women in the MENA region capitalizing on the spark of change induced by youth in Tunisia. As this wave propagated to other territories, in a region where the majority of the population is young, it was evident that educated women were demonstrating leadership qualities through an engaged and active role, joining sometimes opposing groups on the ground and assuming action. Their level of activity made me feel well represented as a woman, and pushed me, along with others, to stay connected to the circle of hot debate.

With the lingering waves of violence and uncertainty, I have concerns on the status of women and the future of our societies. A big question is coming to my mind: What would be the cost for the Arab Spring to blossom?



**Najat Zarrouk**, *Governor, Director of the Training at the Ministry of the Interior; Member of the United States Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA); and Governor, Member of the Board of the Arab Women Leadership Institute (AWLI) of Amman*

The women's issue in the Arab-Muslim world crosses a period marked by ambivalence and contradictions: full of hope but not immune to multiple risks.

If I refer to the example of Morocco, it is quite instructive in this regard. In our country, several qualitative leaps mark the issue of gender equality:

- Access to education was possible in the 1950s;
- Access to public service in 1958;
- The right to vote was extended to women in 1959;
- The appointment of women in positions of responsibility, both in the public and private sector. There is virtually no sector nowadays monopolized by men or difficult to access for women;
- In 1992, the Kingdom of Morocco in its constitution affirms its commitment to human rights as universally recognized;
- The institution of affirmative action (such as quotas) has strengthened the political representation of women both in parliament and in local government;
- Morocco has signed and ratified all the international conventions on women's issues; and

- It has harmonized all the national laws in that regard (Family Law, Civil Statute, Code of Nationality, Penal Law, Penal Process Law, etc.).

The Arab Spring was for our country a favorable environment for moving towards a system that is gaining in democracy, governance, and development through the new constitution of 2011. This “Magna Carta” established the parity, equal opportunities, and the promotion of merit.

Nevertheless, the different electoral operations and processes conducted in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and elsewhere led to the power of Islamist political parties.

It should be ensured that all the gains for the issue of gender equality are not lost and to consolidate and move forward.

No one can tolerate ignoring half of the society, violating the rights of women, or undermining their freedom and dignity. This is the real challenge with which we must now deal.



**Antelak Almutawakel**, *Chairperson, Youth Leadership Development Foundation, Yemen*

Yemeni women, as other Arab women, have made a powerful contribution and had a presence in the Arab Spring which was crowned with a Nobel Peace Prize. Yemeni women have contributed to the Yemeni youth revolution in different ways. They are breaking the stereotypical image of passive women with no power in political life; and young Yemeni women along with their young peers took part in the demonstrations in all of Yemen's squares for a whole year. Their strong presence in all of these squares has melted the social glass ceiling of many backward traditions against women and lessened the social approach of inferiority toward women. Yemeni women, as well as the society, have recognized women's power in making change. For a whole year, Yemeni women had to face the conservative, male views inside the Change and Freedom Squares and succeeded to gain the respect of their male colleagues. However, as in Egypt, Yemeni women's participation in the formulation of official institutions is still weak and does not match their expectations and efforts. Only one woman minister is present in the current government.



**Hind Kabawat**, *International Counsel; Human Rights Activist; and Director, Conflict Resolution Program of Syria, Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution, George Mason University*

A message from the Syrian women who are fighting the good fight. A message from the 8,000 mothers who lost their children in the fight for freedom and liberty in Syria. A message from the sisters and wives of the 16,000 political prisoners in the Syrian prisons. A message from the women activists who are putting their lives in danger every day to get humanitarian aid for the people in Syria.

We can assure all of the women in the world that our fight against the totalitarian regimes of the last 40 years in Syria is our Arab Spring.

Arab women fear that their future will be similar to what happened to Iranian women after the Islamic revolution in Iran in the 1980s. We believe that women's rights will always be better in a democratic society; equality can blossom more in a liberal society which fights corruption and oppression.

The conservative Islamists might win in elections, but they can't win the future of a country if we women don't give up and continue our fight.

The rule of law and civil rights will protect the rights of the women and men in Syria.

It is a fact that in the past women got seats in parliament and ministerial positions in Syria. But we should not kid ourselves, it was all window dressing. Women and men in totalitarian regimes have no power and are not decision-makers. Women were given ministerial positions to show that there is equality, but this was not a sign of equality, it was a means to hide the oppression and the injustice of a dictatorial regime.

Women in Syria will continue the fight. We will keep fighting against whoever assumes leadership if we don't get our rights.

Indeed, it is spring for all those women who learned that dictatorships won't be able to use women and minority issues to stay in power and continue their oppression.

The future belongs to those women who decided like their fellow men not to keep silent.

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**Eman Al Nafjan**, *Riyadh-based blogger at Saudiwoman's weblog*

Since Mohamed Bouazizi set fire to himself and the entire Middle East, everyone has been looking to which country would fall next. So far, Saudi Arabia has been mostly nonflammable. But Arab Spring sparks have been flying within Saudi Arabia's most discriminated against

demographic: women and the Shia. I'm very happy to report that Women's Day 2012 is vastly more optimistic than its predecessor. Apparently, watching women on the frontlines of neighboring countries' revolutions—and in Yemen's case even leading them—has inspired Saudi women to stand up for themselves. Across the kingdom, several campaigns and unofficial groups have started to organize, plan, and execute movements to demand change. Last summer, countless women were inspired by Manal Al Sharif's video and subsequent arrest to drive their own cars and post their videos on YouTube for national and international support. Some were only harassed by the government and society while others were less fortunate—like Shaima Jistania who was sentenced to ten lashes and Dr. Madeeha Al Ajroush who was fired from her job. The women's suffrage movement was the first to attempt to take to the courtroom by having brave women such as Fawziah Al Hani start legal proceedings against the municipalities for gender discrimination in the upcoming elections. Soon after, by royal decree, it was ruled that women would be allowed to take full part in the upcoming elections. Since the suffrage movement's success, other Saudi women's movements began to take their issues to the judicial system. The driving ban movement saw about a dozen women raising cases against the traffic police for gender discrimination in license issuance. Since these cases have not been rejected outright and are still pending, we are very hopeful that they too might be followed by a royal decree ending the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia.



**Muna AbuSulayman**, *Riyadh-based Social Activist and Development Expert*

It is a bit surreal and surprising to realize that in 2012 women in the Middle East post Arab Spring and American women are both facing the possibility of a rollback of the rights earned through long, tough paradigm and cultural shifts that were years in the making. For the first time, my generation is realizing what our mothers and grandmothers knew: that progress is not always linear and that rights secured through negotiations, bloodshed, sacrifices, and democratic processes may not be as secure as we had all once assumed.

The issue of American women's reproductive rights being questioned or cancelled in several states is not merely about the baby's life but about—much more worrisome—wresting control of female empowerment from women. It seemed that some organizations were using the government—again if I may add—to adjust women's rights to suit their theological ideology. This is in a way similar to what women in post Arab Spring countries face but in a different context and for different rights.

The biggest question for women in the Middle East, which is in a state of flux, is how to work on creating a system, alliances, and using negotiation to work out viable solutions for political participation. This is a delicate phase, as suddenly Tunisian women and Egyptian women faced candidates who were openly asking them to step aside or, worse, to become silent partners.

Another point being raised that is important for these women is how to work with the religious establishments—which is often the only power that can sway popular vote and sentiment—to work out agreements and consolidate coalitions for themselves.

There are certain steps that need to be taken:

**Decision-making positions**

Getting enough women into decision-making positions is essential.

Women’s needs should be represented by themselves in order to get an equal voice in shaping their constitutions and societies.

**Quotas**

Women have to push for a fair quota system which can actually get passed—and that means they will need to learn how to play politics.

**Islamic female scholars**

There is a great need for the respected female scholars of the Muslim world to extend a helping hand to their sisters so that they can get a wide legal and Islamic back-up.

**Legal services**

Women can get help from the many organizations providing legal services for women in the Middle East. The services range from simple legal representation in court and advice to creating programs that work on the legal/financial/cultural issues that have or are predicted to hamper women’s development.

By gathering forces, resources, and building coalitions, women in the newly formed governments in the Middle East can get one step closer to building the future for themselves. And that, more than anything else, is worth the effort.

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**\*\* Please note that the opinions expressed herein are those of the individual authors and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.**